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ABSTRACT

The presentations and discussion at the 1980 Symposium on the Writing Crisis held in Santa Barbara, California, yielded two different but complementary perspectives on the problems of writing and writing instruction--a political perspective and a professional one. From a political standpoint there was general agreememt that the notion of a "writing crisis" had meaning mainly in the political arena and then mostly as a slogan and popular myth. Nearly all agreed that the writing crisis parents and school boards seem to be worrying about is largely an invention of the media. Most expressed the suspicion that communities were getting what they wanted in the literacy of most of their students--a form of literacy that gives more attention to the appearance of correctness in an utterance than to its quality as thought. From a professional perspective, the panelists were unanimous in their view that composition claims a privileged place in any curriculum for the unique contributions it makes to the intellectual growth of the student. They also agreed that, unfortunately, instruction in composition in real classes often trivializes the discipline, reducing it to drill work or perfunctory theme writing on topics calling for canned answers in correct forms. The most important reason teachers need to learn about recent scholarly advances in composition is to combat their powerlessness by making the knowledge they already possess more authoritative. The best hope for improvement lies in staff development programs modeled after the Bay Area Writing Project, which are committed to the principles that serve to correct the major defects of current approaches to inservice education and to the teaching of writing. (HOD)

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The Status of the Writing Crisis:

A Retrospective and Prospective Report on the 1980 Symposium on Literacy at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

I suspect that many of the participants at the Symposium on the Writing Crisis held at the Robert Maynard Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions (Santa Barbara, California, July 25, 1980) may have shared my disappointment over our inability to bring our five hours of discussion to a point of satisfactory closure. We couldn't at the end get a convenient handle on where all our talk had gotten us. Our problem may have been that of an embarrassment of riches--more input than anyone could process on the spot.

It is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Our main speakers were as knowledgeable and as lively a group of specialists in composition as have ever sat around a single table: James Moffett, Charles Cooper, Rex Brown, Ross Winterowd, Ed White, and Miles Myers. Their respondents--about a dozen in all--included leaders of the California Writing Project and eminent UC academicians from half a dozen fields.

As moderator for the Symposium, I feel particularly responsible for our failure to achieve some kind of satisfying closure. I wish that in the final minutes of our long day's discussion I had been able to achieve the clarity of vision that a retrospective view now more generously affords for summing up. My excuse is that such a composed view is best discovered through the process of reflection and response that we call composition--a process Charles Cooper (quoting the Russian psycholinguist, Luria) referred to as "a simultaneous self-reviewing structure."

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In the next few pages I shall try to make use of such a structure to locate and summarize the points of substantial agreement that were reached at the Symposium. The discussants did not always agree, of course, but there did emerge from our far-ranging discourse what I take to be a coherent and comprehensive vision of the current state of composition in America. I would like to sketch out the dimensions of that vision and comment on what it implies for present and future action.

Roughly speaking, the presentations and discussion at the Symposium yielded two different but complementary perspectives on the problems of writing and writing instruction--a political perspective and a professional one. From a professional standpoint composition is an increasingly significant modern discipline that is developing rapidly in theory and instructional practice. From a political standpoint there seems to be more to worry about than to hope for.

The Politics of the Writing Crisis

To deal with political issues first, there was general agreement that the notion of a "writing crisis" had meaning mainly in the political arena and then mostly as a slogan and popular myth. That there is a kind of national hysteria about whether our children are going to grow up illiterate is useful to the academic community insofar as it helps to generate funds for composition research and program development. On the other hand, the ways in which many schools seem to be meeting demands for "improved" instruction may be self-defeating.

The Status of Basic Skills

Nearly all the panelists and discussants agreed that the writing crisis that parents and school boards seem to be worrying about is largely an

invention of the media. This view was substantiated by Rex Brown's report on his early findings from examining ten years of writing samples collected from tens of thousands of students by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP data, according to Brown, show that over the years most American students--two-thirds to three-fourths of them--have been managing to achieve respectable levels of basic skill in writing. They know how to write ordinary sentences and paragraphs without grossly violating the commonplace conventions of written language. In the ten years of NAEP testing, moreover, this basic level of skill seems to have held steady or improved in its quality and in its distribution across the population.

Higher Cognitive Skills

These findings are less encouraging when viewed against the backdrop of some other observations offered by Brown. First, he noted that while basic skills are being maintained or upgraded across the country, the same samples of student writing showed a decline in higher cognitive skills. In other words, since 1969, when the first national assessment of writing took place, students seem to have been learning to write more correctly but less thoughtfully. These findings (which Brown regards as preliminary) invite us to speculate on how much the ascendency of the "back to basics" movement--with its passion for correctness--over the past decade has actually contributed to a decline in the competence of students for performing tasks calling for more advanced cognitive and problem-solving skills. Certainly it is easiest to be correct in language use when you pay most attention to the surface features of your utterance and least to the quality or depth of your ideas.

Whatever the explanation, the pattern of decline noted on writing samples has also been noted by researchers in other fields. The much-

publicized decline in SAT scores a decade ago, according to Brown, turned out to be attributable largely to test items that required students to exercise higher rather than basic cognitive skills. A similar pattern has shown up on mathematics tests. Interestingly, all of these declines turn out to be associated with parallel drops in the number of academic courses taken in high school by the tested populations of students.

Illiteracy and Poverty

None of this is to say that popular fears about the shocking illiteracy of students are entirely unfounded. According to Brown, one fourth to one third of the total school population seems not to have mastered the most fundamental skills and conventions for producing written language. The differences between the competence of this population of students and that of the more skilled majority seems, however, to be one of kind rather than degree. There is no gradual decline in the level of skill exhibited by the two population groups, but a dramatic gap between them. Moreover, the unskilled students are almost exclusively those whom we could also classify as economically impoverished and culturally dispossessed. Their illiteracy appears to be less a reflection of their schooling than a symptom of their poverty.

Literacy and Power

Most of the panelists, including Brown himself were inclined to offer political interpretations of the patterns of competency

that Brown had observed. Most expressed the suspicion, if not the conviction, that school boards and the people who control schools in most communities were getting what they wanted in the literacy of most of their students--a form of literacy that gives more attention to the appearance of correctness in an utterance than to its quality as thought.

The panelists noted that they were not alone or original in their view of the politics of schooling. Paul Goodman, among others, pointed out long ago that public education seems devoted to promulgating just enough literacy to allow people to follow instructions, but not enough to make it likely that people will reason critically about such instructions. Nor is such a limited kind of literacy the peculiar desideratum of the American school system. Claude Levi Strauss, writing in Triste Tropique in 1953, observes that throughout the history of literate civilizations, writing has always been much more an instrument of political control and exploitation than a force for individual liberation or enlightenment. "The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant" says Levi Strauss, "is the creation of cities and empires; that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system and their grading into castes and classes."

None of the Symposium panelists seemed to notice in the heat of the discussion that earlier in the proceedings they had themselves anticipated the tenor and even the metaphoric vehicle of Levi Strauss's observation. This occurred in the concern several panelists expressed about the possibility that as a profession our patterns of teaching, grading, and testing may serve to ratify and perpetuate economic and political inequities that we would personally claim to disavow.

The Subversiveness of Humane Literacy

In the meantime nearly every speaker seemed willing to join with Ed White in embracing a conception of literacy that places composition teachers in an adversary position with respect to many of the conservative instincts of the prevailing culture. All agreed that the literacy that the profession of English has traditionally cherished--the literacy that gave meaning to the vocations most of us had chosen--insofar as it cultivated and called for

critical habits of mind, had to be potentially subversive to the established order.

The Discipline of Composition

Still the panelists could also agree that the political uses or misuses of writing are incidental to our concern for it as an intellectual discipline. Moving from a political to a professional perspective, the panelists were unanimous in their view that composition claims a privileged place in any curriculum for the unique contributions it makes to the intellectual growth of the student. Charles Cooper enumerated some of the special contributions writing makes to thinking in the demands it makes on the writer for planning his discourse, for discovering the hierarchical structure of his own thoughts, and for projecting his thinking ahead while simultaneously reviewing what he has already written. To master such intellectual processes, Cooper observed, is to learn a discipline that must permanently change the learner in a way that can only be described as making him smarter. But then only if writing is engaged in primarily as an intellectual discipline, rather than as an occasion for merely displaying linguistic good manners.

Unfortunately, all the panelists also agreed, instruction in composition in real classes often trivializes the discipline, reducing it to drill work or perfunctory theme writing on topics calling for canned answers in correct forms. That schools may be politically hospitable to such instruction does not account for its occurrence--only for its toleration. It occurs and thrives more as the result of failures in our professional and academic community than in our political one.

Composition as a Field of Knowledge

Nor can it be any longer said that composition instruction is generally in a bad way because as a profession we lack the authoritative knowledge

necessary to teach our subject. On this point Ross Winterowd was particularly emphatic, insisting that in the past 15 years or so there has been a virtual revolution of knowledge in our field. Now for the first time composition itself--as distinct from rhetoric--may be said to constitute a discrete discipline, one with reasonably discernible boundaries, canonical texts, established methods of inquiry, generally accepted theoretical frameworks, and a body of shared authoritative knowledge. Nearly all the panelists representing the field of composition agreed, in fact, that when it comes to the teaching of composition, we now know fairly authoritatively what works, what doesn't, and why.

Sources of Poor Instruction

If as a profession we possess such a body of knowledge, why is it that so many teachers in our field seem to be engaged in instructional practices that we know to be counter-productive or useless? Surely ill-informed parents and school boards can get what they want only because there is no competent professional authority available locally to resist them or even to offer an alternative.

Part of the problem is that of the inevitable time lag between advances in knowledge through research and the wide dissemination of such new knowledge to practitioners in the field--in any field. This may be a particularly acute problem in the field of composition, since many of the insights that shape current thinking about composition instruction developed out of research that has taken place in the last 10-15 years, most of it having been published after 1969 when the movement of new teachers from teacher-training institutions into schools came to a virtual halt. In short, most English teachers currently working in schools took their University

training before most of the recent advances in our professional knowledge about composition took place.

Composition in Departments of English

A more disheartening problem is that whenever and wherever a teacher happened to receive his pre-service education, it is likely that composition was ignored as a subject for serious study. To a large extent this remains the case today. Respectable University English departments continue to ignore composition except as a remedial or service course for freshman--a course from which students likely to major in English are also likely to be exempt. Such courses are invariably taught by graduate students or by the most junior and temporary members of a department. In a typical English department virtually nobody teaching composition is likely to have ever studied it as a field of scholarship or to know anything about recent publications or advances in research in the field.

Nor have English departments shown much inclination to recognize or correct the ignorance of their teaching staff in composition. In most departments composition is still not regarded as an acceptable field of specialization for a doctoral candidate in English. In many departments it is not even a proper subject for a graduate seminar.

Typically, English departments show their contempt for composition by putting their composition programs under the direction of persons whose only qualification for the task (and frequently for departmental membership) is a willingness to tolerate administrative drudgery. On the rare occasion when an English department sponsors a highly professional and well-informed composition program run by people who are specialists in the field, both the program and the specialists are treated like departmental step children,

having to scramble for resources and promotions that are granted more generously to programs and scholars in literature. These observations occasioned Ross Winterowd's memorable remark that the group of composition specialists gathered at the Hutchins Center for this Symposium were clearly "the cream of the scum."

If composition is undernourished as a field for serious inquiry in departments of English, it is starved to death in other departments. It is a mere afterthought, if it is thought of at all, in departments of speech and communication, and (with a few significant exceptions) a minor subtopic in the field of reading or language arts in schools of education. Ross Winterowd described the dilemma of composition accurately when he noted that over the past twenty years composition has evolved into a coherent discipline with everything it needs to constitute a respectable field for research and instruction except an academic home.

Past Failures in Inservice Training

If the renaissance in knowledge about composition is going to have any significant impact on the way this generation of children is taught in schools, it is going to have to first awaken public school teachers who are already on the job. That means it will have to happen through "inservice" or "staff development" programs in schools. Unfortunately such programs have a long history of failure. Fortunately, recent developments offer us some new ground for hope.

Most of the Symposium panelists agreed with Miles Myers that programs seeking to improve schools through inservice instruction offered primarily by outside experts represent a past inservice model that has repeatedly failed and that must continue to fail. That is because such programs are fundamentally contemptuous of the teachers they propose to help. They are

built on the assumption that teachers are themselves defective and lacking in the professional resources necessary to help themselves or each other.

When a school looks to outside experts, as most do, rather than to its own most successful teachers as resources for each other, it is officially devaluing the expertise that successful teachers possess individually and collectively by virtue of their classroom experience. Furthermore, such schools typically declare themselves willing to grant a special and superior authority to knowledge acquired by scholars through research--knowledge acquired outside the context of the classroom where it is presumably to be applied. Such a system of values implies that what teachers need in order to become more competent professionals is not the kind of expertise that successful teaching experience can provide, but a privileged body of scholarly information to which a teacher's role in the classroom ordinarly gives him no access.

True and False Professional Knowledge

None of this is to say that teachers can't use new information, whatever its source. It is to say that there is no reason to believe that whatever incompetent teaching is going on in schools is likely to be corrected by providing ineffective teachers with more information from outside experts. The recent history of the insults to literacy that have been perpetrated in the name of such new ideas as transformational grammar, the new criticism, the new rhetoric, elective English, relevant reading, affective learning, and probably even sentence-combining (and now post-structuralist criticism) ought to show us that what is generally needed to improve teaching is not more information but more thought.

The sufficiency of a composition teacher, in particular, is ultimately a function of his capacity to respond to what is in front of him, not by

rules but with intelligence--to see the new form that works, to observe the sentence fragment that isn't one, to note evasions in reasoning when he finds them, and to recognize and appreciate from his own experience the obstacles that a writer must face in composing. The results of research may offer insights into all of these processes, but they won't give any sort of guidance that can substitute for a teacher's own careful and disciplined attention to the writing and the students in front of him.

Here I may seem to be contradicting my earlier observation. I began talking about inservice education as a way to spread recent advances in knowledge about composition into the schools, as if the lack of such knowledge among classroom teachers represents a problem that can account for ineffective instruction in schools. Now, however, I seem to be minimizing the importance of such professional knowledge to teachers. I seem to be saying instead, that the attainment of such knowledge can represent a false idol for a teacher who would use his ignorance of some body of specialized knowledge as an escape from his greater responsibility for exercising his own best judgment and independent intelligence in attending to the problems that the teaching of writing presents to every conscientious instructor. My point is that any procedure or body of knowledge or instructional method that invalidates or discounts or seeks to suspend the authentic authority of a teacher's own intelligence and understanding and experience becomes a false idol to the degree that it undermines a teacher's faith in the primary authority of his own literacy and intelligence.

Ignorance vs. Stupidity

Fortunately the paradox I have been trying to illuminate unravels itself in what a teacher is likely to find by paying attention to most of the recent advances in research and instructional development in composition.

For by and large recent advances in research and practice have tended not so much to argue for new methods of instruction as to validate methods that have long been intuitively employed by thoughtful, literate, and humane teachers.

Does it really take an extensive body of research literature to persuade such a teacher of the desirability of teaching writing as a process, of the danger that overmonitoring for correctness can block a student's fluency, or of the advantages of having students write for a variety of audiences and purposes? Of course, research offers us more than suggestions that strike us as obvious once we hear them. Recent developments in the field have been enormously helpful to the best of teachers--especially to the best. For in the hands of a teacher who does not engage in the writing process himself, who is not attentive to the intellectual quality of the writing his students produce, or to the emotional and intellectual obstacles that can make competent writers look incompetent, nothing that the renaissance of knowledge in composition has produced will be applicable to instruction except as a gimmick--a gimmick not to be trusted any more than the last one. And under pressure from parents or a school board, or a well-meaning but misinformed principal, such a teacher will eventually return to the safe and intellectually inert material of a traditional grammar text.

Now no one knows how many sensitive and humane and literate teachers are inhabiting English classrooms and teaching our children to write. But the fact is that no amount of inservice training is going to make much difference to a teacher who is terminally stupid. Residing behind Miles Myers' passionate insistence that teachers themselves must be the principal inservice resource for one another is his faith as a classroom teacher that most of his colleagues are not stupid--even if their teaching sometimes makes them appear to be.

His outrage over traditional approaches to inservice comes from his recognition that the characteristic attitude of administrators and school of education specialists toward ordinary classroom teachers effectively lobotomizes teachers by persuading them that they are in fact stupid and not to be trusted. No matter how valid the research results or techniques for teaching demonstrated through an inservice workshop, such a workshop must be regarded as pernicious, from Miles Myers' point of view, to the degree that it leaves teachers professionally weaker rather than stronger than they were before. And it will surely leave them weaker if they come away believing that the knowledge available to classroom teachers through their own experiences in the classroom is inferior to the theoretical and laboratory-based knowledge presented to them in a two-hour lecture by an out-of-town expert. Teachers who imbibe from the fruit of that tree of knowledge will find their eyes opened, but their minds darkened.

The Castration of Writing Teachers

In this context James Moffett observed that in his experience teachers are neither stupid nor ill-informed, but powerless. Because they are powerless to act on their knowledge they tend to lose confidence in the efficacy of what they know and eventually to lose contact with their own best knowledge. Moffett claimed that most teachers he had met across the country are more knowledgeable than they would appear to be from their instructional practices and that almost all of them teach at least part of the time in ways they don't believe in. They feel forced to teach in ways that run counter to their knowledge, says Moffett, because they lack the professional clout necessary to stand up to misguided administrators. More precisely, perhaps, (to speak in my own idiom) they lack the chutzpah. Like the Scarecrow who needs a diploma to know he has a brain, many teachers (like

the rest of us) will join with administrators in granting authority only to persons whose opinions and competence are sanctioned by the visible signs of degrees, titles, and publications. Lacking such symbols of authority themselves, teachers are as ready as anybody else to distrust the insights to which their own experience and intelligence give them access.

Catch 22

Miles Myers pointed out that teachers may also appear to be ill-informed or stupid because they are often forced (or feel forced) to teach to a curriculum that is designed around a test that was in turn designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the curriculum. Such tests are frequently instituted by school administrators and are regularly required by state funding agencies to demonstrate that funded educational programs are doing the job they are intended to do. But since tests can generally measure only trivial outcomes, curriculum planners must develop trivial goals and must see to it that such goals are met. The school system that would ignore these requirements would be cutting itself off from sources of funds that it needs to operate in the first place. The alternative to this system, at least from the point of view of funding agencies, is for them to fund instructional programs directed to needs that can't be demonstrated and that promise to achieve results that can't be validated. Yet as Miles Myers eloquently expressed the dilemma for the profession, "it's in trying to prove we're rational that we're going nuts!"

The Professional Restoration of Composition Teachers: Retrospective and Prospective Remarks on the Symposium

Looking back at the principal obstacles to effective writing instruction, as these were elaborated during the Symposium, we find that the most recurrent theme, both from a political and a professional perspective, is

that of the powerlessness of writing teachers. It is their impotence rather than their ignorance that constitutes the real crisis in composition.

Thus nearly all the panelists agreed that the most important reason teachers need to learn about recent scholarly advances in composition is to combat their powerlessness by making the knowledge they already substantially possess more authoritative. Through advances in learning, teachers gain additional authority both with respect to others and with respect to themselves. In general the more a teacher learns about the results of research in composition, language acquisition, and related fields, the more inclined he will become in his teaching to keep faith with his own intelligence, informed by his own experiences as a writer and teacher.

The Writing Project Model

Given this conception of the writing crisis and the current status of composition research and instruction in this country, the best hope for improvement would seem to lie in staff development programs modeled after the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). BAWP and all of its offspring projects (including the South Coast Writing Project, co-sponsor of the Symposium), known collectively as the National Writing Project, are committed to four principles which serve to correct the major defects of current approaches to inservice-education and to the teaching of composition.

Teachers are the Best Inservice Teachers for Each Other

The first principle of BAWP rests on an article of faith--faith in the fundamental competence and professionalism of teachers. The BAWP model begins by assuming that many outstanding composition teachers can be found in elementary and secondary schools and that, in fact, nearly every composition teacher is effective in at least some dimension of composition instruction.

This means that teachers themselves are a vast source of expertise for the improvement of composition instruction. They need only be brought together to demonstrate to each other what they individually do that works in their classrooms. The first principle, then, is a principle of collegial trust which assumes that teachers are the best inservice teachers for each other.

Recent Advances in Knowledge Can Lend New Authority to Composition Teachers

The next principle is based on the recognition that research in recent years has generated a substantial body of knowledge in the field of composition that teachers can use to improve their teaching. Good teachers also need to be able to cite such knowledge in order to authoritatively justify what by their own lights they want to do and are already doing in their classrooms. The second principle, then, is one that seeks mainly to correct the political and professional powerlessness of teachers. This principle also lies behind the Writing Project's inservice structure which consists of a University-based Summer Institute in composition for about 25 outstanding teachers, and an academic-year inservice program in schools.

Typically, teachers selected for the Summer Institute are designated University Fellows in Composition and paid a fellowship stipend of $500. For five weeks in the summer they join as colleagues with University researchers, curriculum specialists, and professional writers to form a kind of think-tank in composition. Here they demonstrate approaches to teaching, examine rhetorical and instructional theories, familiarize themselves with the results of recent research, write extensively, and join together in small editing groups to read and respond to each other's writing.

At the end of the summer, the 25 Fellows become members of the Writing Project staff as teacher-consultants who are available to conduct similarly

validating inservice programs throughout the academic year for their colleagues in local schools. The initial selection of this cadre of teachers, their titles as Fellows and teacher-consultants, and the added expertise they obtain through the Summer Institute all confer on them precisely the sort of symbolic and substantive authority that they need in order to exercise their appropriate professional power within their own school communitites.

Writing Teachers Must Write

The third informing principle of the Writing Project model seeks to invest in composition teachers the most authentic source of professional authority--their own experience as literate adults; i.e., as persons who themselves engage in the writing process and therefore know for themselves the pitfalls and frustrations that every writer encounters. This principle, simply stated, is that writing teachers must write. Hence, the emphasis on teachers themselves writing in the Summer Institute and in inservice workshops and with their own students in classes. Writing Project Fellows are also encouraged to write for professional journals and for a number of Writing Project publications which were created partly to serve as outlets for the writing produced by Fellows.

The Principle of Collegiality

Underlying all of these principles is a subsuming principle of collegiality. It insists that educational problems can best be solved by the combined efforts of teacher-practitioners at all levels working in concert with curriculum specialists, University-based researchers, and non-academic professionals. It further insists that just as classroom teachers need the expertise of researchers to lend authority to practices that originate in the exigencies of the classroom, so do researchers need the help of classroom

teachers to test out theories and to provide an ethnographically valid setting in which research can be conducted. The BAWP model thus conceives of teachers as integral members of a research team, involved not only in the applications of new knowledge but in its development and dissemination through field-based research and publication.

The Promise of the Writing Projects

There is a growing body of evaluation data suggesting that the BAWP model is effective in improving instruction and the actual quality of student writing produced within regions served by a Writing Project. Given the conception of the writing crisis adumbrated by the Hutchins Center Symposium, an even stronger argument for the Writing Project approach can be found in the testimony of teachers who have been Project Fellows. These teachers characteristically report that their Project experience transformed their professional lives by restoring to them a sense of efficacy and a renewed sense of having a meaningful calling. Through it most teachers also find for the first time that they feel themselves part of a larger collegial community, allied with researchers, writers, and teachers at all levels in a common cultural enterprise. Such testimony offers us not a guarantee, but at least a reasonable hope for the eventual solution of our current writing crisis.